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Folk Pedagogies of Change: Developing an Early Years Education Development Strategy for China

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ABSTRACT

Reform initiatives are common throughout the Chinese early years education sector. This paper proposes a conceptual framework of a folk pedagogy of change as a perspective on the systemic barriers to the development of practice which foregrounds some of the tensions within and across these barriers. Our analysis is based on three commissioned literature reviews and site visits with practitioners and parents to Chinese Kindergarten and early years settings. The use of situated learning theory as a perspective for analysing interconnected and interdependent organisations is offered as a way of extending our understanding of educational change. This enables a move beyond a simplistic and essentialist notion of culture which locates implementation problems at the incompatibility of varied cultural perspectives. A folk pedagogy of change can help to understand why a range of educational contexts might be resistant to externally generated ideas for educational change.

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The early years education sector across China has been prioritised as an area in need of intervention in both policy and practice. However, the predicted growth and demand for early years education, combined with an unregulated system of both public and private providers and varying levels of parental engagement and knowledge, represent some distinct difficulties within Early Childhood Education and Care. Developing a strategy to support the continued progress of high-quality early years education across such a vast and varied country represents unique challenges. This paper summarises those challenges and positions them within a conceptual framework of a folk pedagogy of change pertinent to the Chinese context, and possibly wider afield.

Building from a perspective of situated learning within communities across a landscape of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998, 2010; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2014), this paper considers the systemic barriers to the development of practice within Chinese Kindergartens (and other early years settings) and foregrounds some of the tensions within, and across, boundaries of practice. It proposes that one significant barrier to the development of practice within Chinese Kindergartens is due to a 'folk pedagogy of change' and explicates this through what we consider to be a dominant

theory of change in China, in relation to the conflicting priorities within and across communities of practice.

The context and our involvement

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in China has had a long and rich history, with a number of developments and influences throughout the 20th century (Qi and Melhuish 2017). Since the 1980s in particular, there have been successive government and provincial policies and guidance documents aiming to develop the provision of Kindergarten education (for 3–6 year-olds) within China. The policies since 2010 and the ‘Kindergarten expansion movement’ have confirmed the importance of Kindergarten practice and positioned it as the foundation for the education system, advocating for play-based and child-centred approaches (Qi and Melhuish 2017). However, despite these policies, it has been suggested that practice within Kindergartens remains predominantly whole class, didactic, adult-led teaching, indicating transmission and acquisition approaches to teaching and learning (Li, Wang, and Wong 2011). We have sought to explore potential explanations for why government-led policy reforms are not, necessarily, resulting to practice reforms. Investigating the barriers to change offers opportunities for facilitating the alignment of policies and practice by developing understandings of the tensions, which perpetuate the apparent policy-practice gap noted by Li, Wang, and Wong (2011).

The impetus for this work came through a request to support the development of ECEC provision in China, through culturally appropriate and contextually sensitive collaborations. This led to the establishment of our Centre on Teacher and Early Years Education, funded through private donation, with the aim to support practice aligned to the changing national policies on Early Years Education across China. The Centre has a particular focus on teacher education and works in collaboration with both Chinese and UK partners and stakeholders. Our purpose is to bring together academics, teacher educators and practitioners from international settings and across China, in order to collaboratively generate effective and sustainable change in Chinese early years practice, based on robust evidence. The collaborations are fundamental to the work of the Centre, to ensure that its work is informed by partners with a full understanding of the richness, history and diversity of ECEC in Chinese contexts. We aim to ensure that our work does not adopt a deficit view of ECEC provision and is mutually beneficial for enhancing understanding for both UK (where our Centre is based) and Chinese partners.

As part of the establishment of the Centre and its ways of working, the first activity was to try to understand and identify the specific barriers to effective and sustainable educational change in China. We therefore undertook a range of information gathering activities, including two visits, and three literature reviews, which make up the data that underpin this paper. It is through the examination of this evidence that we identified a common reason offered for why change initiatives fail was perceived cultural differences between the Chinese practitioners and the western pedagogical approaches articulated in Chinese policies and international partnerships. This explanation is somewhat simplistic and adopts an essentialising view of the complex cultures which have influenced, and continue to influence, education in China. We therefore recognised a need for a conceptual framework that goes beyond such simplistic descriptions. The purpose of

this paper is to outline this conceptual framework, and the rationale and evidence base that underpin it.

Methodology

This paper draws upon analysis of two data sources. The first is the product of three independently conducted literature reviews, each with a different methodology (detailed below).

- **Early Childhood Education in People’s Republic of China: a Literature Review of the Publications Written in English**, (Bullough and Palaiologou 2019): conducted in two stages using the electronic catalogue of UCL Institute of Education and the database of the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI). The initial stage focused on articles that had been published in peer-reviewed journals from 2015 to 2019. The results were further filtered and a meta-analysis was conducted. The second-stage broadened the publication years to include articles published between 2000 and 2019 (Bullough and Palaiologou 2019).
- **Rapid Evidence Assessment (RAE) on Quality Issues in Early Years Education in China (publications written in English)** (Muñoz-Chereau 2019): conducted using only peer-reviewed articles, book chapters and dissertations produced between 2010 and 2019 and listed in education-related databases (Australian Educational Index, British Educational Index, Eric Proquest, ProQuest Education and UCL Explore). The RAE analysed 70 sources that add to the existing literature on the quality of Chinese ECEC published in English (Muñoz-Chereau 2019).
- **Understanding assessment in early childhood education in China (publications written in Mandarin)** (from Zhang, Wang, and Hua 2019): conducted using the CNKI database, searching articles related to assessment in ECEC from 2009 to 2019.

The second data source stems from two research visits to China conducted in November 2018 and July/August 2019, respectively. During those research visits, meetings, interviews and site visits were conducted as follows:

- ‘Focus group’ with MA in Early Years Education graduates and alumni based in Beijing and Shanghai,
- Visits to two public kindergartens, three private kindergartens, two primary schools and a private family, in Beijing and Shanghai, in November 2018.
- Meetings with Beijing and Shanghai higher education institutions and local education board members.
- Meetings with Teacher Training organisations and an online training platform company.
- Further visits to two kindergarten (one private in Shanghai, one public in Beijing) in August 2019, which included a discussion with parents, and discussions with kindergarten principals and teachers facilitated by various educational institutions.

Visits to the settings were arranged by our hosts (and research partners). The Chinese early years landscape is made up of both public and private providers. Whilst public provision is perceived to be the most prestigious (Zhang and MacLean 2012), the sector has experienced a huge growth in all areas to support the increased demand. We visited both private and public providers which represented a range of fee types rather than a range of quality; the settings we visited also may not be fully representative of the range of provision available in Beijing and Shanghai. Similarly, as these cities are two developed urban areas, the settings will not be representative of provision elsewhere.

The findings from the two data sources – the outcomes of the literature reviews and the data collected from the site visits – were combined and analysed, initially through thematic analysis and then further explored using the ‘Communities of Practice’ conceptual framework provided by Wenger (1998). The research was designed to be particularly robust by combining the three different literature review methodologies, with the collation of empirical data, as outlined below.

Ethical and analytical approach

Our literature reviews placed emphasis on research conducted by Chinese nationals and/or reported in Mandarin. We are conscious of our own status, as academics based in an English University and our lack of direct experience of early years settings in China, and the implications for our ethno-centric bias, lack of cultural understanding (and sensitivity) and our outsider status in the research. We acknowledge that our awareness of this is not sufficient to counterbalance our inevitable cultural bias and assumptions. However, we are also aware of a growth in requests from Chinese organisations to universities such as ours for assistance in developing Early Years Education provision and practice. Therefore, we consider that a reflective but informed stance from our own cultural context is an important contribution to the field. We believe that it may lay bare previously invisible assumptions and may be some assistance to scholars both in China and in other contexts in articulating issues connected with educational change.

We recognise ethical issues around informed consent for the participants in the workshops. Participants were informed that the purpose of the workshop was for data collection and of the nature of the research that was being conducted. However, due to the somewhat hierarchical nature of some aspects of Chinese working relations, the authors were not entirely convinced that all participants were fully informed of the specific nature of their participation. Participation in the research meetings appeared to be conducted in a hierarchical manner, where the most senior people present spoke on behalf of the group. We, therefore, did not feel that an individual’s (lack of) participation indicated either consent or disagreement, nor did we know whether the views expressed were, truly, representative of the views of all participants. All participation has been anonymised and we cross-referenced feedback to ensure that no individual participant could be identified and, mindful of the complex issues outlined above, understood their contributions in this regard. It is for this reason, and the complexities around faithful translation of views (which caused some discussion amongst our Chinese colleagues) that we have omitted direct quotations in this reporting of the data.

Settings were chosen through recommendations and personal connections and were therefore not representative of all kindergartens in Beijing, Shanghai or indeed across

China. They were often brokered through colleagues at key university settings (East China Normal University and Beijing Normal University) and often drew upon alumni or partnership networks. We are also conscious that the practice seen in the settings was that which the settings chose to present to us. We, therefore, do not consider the empirical experience to have been impartial or representative. However, it was not our intention to undertake a fully representative survey, nor would it even have been possible to have gained a full understanding of the Chinese ECEC practice through two short visits. It was instead our intention to experience these settings first hand in order to deepen our understanding of the findings from the literature reviews, to add texture to our reading of that analysis, and to enable us to test the findings of the reviews against the views of a selection of practitioners. It is important to note, therefore, that the primary data collected during these activities have only been used for verification purposes.

The analysis of the data was undertaken in two parts: a thematic analysis and then analysis aligned to a conceptual framework. The thematic analysis was undertaken by the two authors separately and then combined to look for commonalities and discrepancies. Our analysis was based on our reading of the literature reviews and the extensive notes taken on our site visits. Whilst our thematic analysis revealed various similarities, it became apparent that the individual themes identified provided only a limited view, if explored in isolation, and did not sufficiently explicate the complexities of the contexts or the issues being explored. To ensure rigour, and to ensure that the interconnections between the themes could be explored, we drew upon situated learning theory, presented as 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991), as an analytical framework for considering the development of practitioner competence within Kindergartens as individual Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998). This approach enabled exploration of the contextual factors that influence practice, and notions of what our research participants considered to be *esteemed practices*. Furthermore, taking a broader view of interconnected organisational activity across a 'landscape of practice' (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2014) enabled us to consider the wider, varying and competing perspectives on competence in practice, and their contribution to the barriers to change within the social system(s) of Chinese Early Education and Care.

The synthesis of the findings will be presented through discussion of the Chinese context in relation to theories on learning within, and across, communities of practice. However, firstly we want to articulate our understanding of educational change in China, and of how the literature has expressed problems with facilitating change in China. We will then highlight how our empirical experiences in China aligned with those findings.

Specific challenges with education change initiatives

Throughout our research, we were aware that the development of ECEC in China has been driven by a dominant theory of change, made explicit to us through conversation with a range of Chinese partners, and verified by others. The theory of change can be somewhat simplistically described as:

- Educational (exchange) visits of Chinese scholars to foreign 'experts' to learn and observe 'advanced educational concepts'.

- Chinese scholars return to China and develop and adapt the educational concepts to work within Chinese settings.
- Successful changes are adopted as policy by local (or national) authorities.
- Further teacher education and professional development programmes are developed to support teachers to comply with policy directives.

This approach to educational change has a long history, with various international contexts' practices being foregrounded at different times (Qi and Melhuish 2017). Challenges in implementing national reform directives at classroom level have also been noted in teaching older age groups within China (Lee and Yin 2011; Gu and Li 2013). In investigating educational change in Chinese ECEC, with a view to collaborating to support ongoing development of Kindergarten practice, our research, therefore, started by exploring perspectives on the possible barriers to implementing policy change into practice.

Within the reviewed literature, several specific factors were identified as challenges within the context of Chinese ECEC. The most pertinent aspects of this, for the purpose of our discussion, were the training of teachers, parental expectations and the evaluation of Kindergartens, each of which we detail below. These themes were also pertinent in our discussions and workshops, although it would be fair to say that some practitioners foregrounded more immediate pedagogical concerns than these systemic ones. In our analysis, we considered that pedagogy was an essential element in both teacher training and kindergarten expectations and thus this was included therein.

Teacher training

Two of the literature reviews cited Teacher Training and Continued Professional Development as a significant limiting factor in the development of ECEC in China. In particular, the limited number of qualified teachers (Fees, Hoover and Zheng 2014; Xie et al. 2017, cited in Muñoz-Chereau 2019) and inconsistency was noted in the structure and content of both pre-service and in-service teacher training (Bullough and Palaiologou 2019).

A further dimension in considering the influence of teacher training on the development of ECEC is the proposed teacher-practice gap and policy-practice gap (Li, Wang, and Wong 2011, cited in Muñoz-Chereau 2019), which have been suggested to be perpetuating historically prevalent teaching practices. The research suggests notably limited progress in the development of teacher-child interactions over the last decade (Pianta et al. 2017; Pan and Liu 2008, cited in Muñoz-Chereau 2019), indicating that developments in professional development have not been successful in changing teaching practices.

Within our discussions with practitioners, the issues around teacher training were somewhat differently framed. Participants appeared satisfied with the contents and structure of teacher training (in that they felt that new practitioners were well prepared and had a knowledge base about theories of teaching and learning), but commented on the lack of practical experience gained by new teachers, the high demand for well-qualified teachers and the need to ensure an adequate supply of well-prepared teachers. We were also made aware of the complex and comprehensive infrastructure of teacher training: through setting-based, local district-based and province-wide programmes, as

well as the proliferation of public and private offers through a variety of infrastructures and networks. The prevailing demand appeared to be for ‘innovation’, and credence was given to ‘international best practice’ and ‘developed educational concepts’, which were hoped to transform teacher practices and align with the Ministry of Education (2012) directive. There was also, however, scepticism about the extent to which such practices would become embedded and could surpass traditional pedagogies and approaches (see also Gao et al. 2021).

Parental expectations

The influence of parental expectations on ECEC featured in all the commissioned literature reviews. It has been suggested that the exam-oriented education system has shaped parental views of education throughout all sectors, including ECEC, and that this has limited the development of alternative pedagogical perspectives (Fees, Hoover and Zheng 2014, cited in Muñoz-Chereau 2019). Furthermore, the perception of a highly competitive educational context promoted parenting practices intended to influence children’s trajectories within that context (ibid). Furthermore, inconsistent priorities and policies in ECEC have been noted as contributing to conflicts within parental perspectives on effective provision (Yang and Li 2019, cited in Bullough and Palaiologou 2019). Additional research has explored family structures, parenting styles, parents’ beliefs on play and learning, parental involvement and engagement in their children’s education, all of which suggest significant interest from parents in their children’s development, but differential access to provision, priorities for children’s development and expectations of kindergartens (Bullough and Palaiologou 2019). The review from Zhang, Wang, and Hua (2019) also notes the disparate perspectives from parents and other stakeholders upon the constituent elements of quality in ECEC.

This theme was also evident in our discussions with practitioners, who described some of the challenges around parental expectations which were sometimes contradictory in nature: oscillating between a desire for their children to experience free play and a concern that they might be ‘left behind’ or not experiencing the same range of educational opportunities as their peers. Participants also noted that some of the challenges were present with modes of communication: the popular social media platform WeChat became a key site for discussions with parents, but also for parents to share with each other their concerns about ECEC, sometimes in critical and ‘unhelpful’ ways. Many practitioners (and parents) that we spoke to noted that the changing social dynamics (the relaxation of the One Child Policy, family-based migration and parental educational participation) were all changing how parents viewed ECEC.

Evaluation of Kindergartens

The final literature review focused specifically on assessment in ECEC in China. This noted the dominance of structural quality measurements in evaluating provision (Yang and Peng 2017 cited in Zhang, Wang, and Hua 2019), and varying assessment measurements, instruments and ranking systems for conceptualising quality in ECEC. It identified that the lack of consistent quality measures resulted in substantial differences in the

understanding of quality by different stakeholders (Kang and Liu 2011; Zhang 2012, cited in Zhang, Wang, and Hua 2019).

Again this theme was also evident in the discussions with practitioners: frustration was expressed at the adoption of some international quality evaluation tools, which they felt were not appropriate to their context, and concern was expressed about 'other' providers who might not be providing good quality ECEC. We also noted considerable differences in how some pedagogical practices and approaches were described. For example, we spoke with several practitioners who advocated a play-based pedagogical approach, but when we asked them to give us an example of this, the interpretations of play varied widely, suggesting considerable variation in how certain practices, quality measures and pedagogical principles (particularly those developed overseas) were being interpreted and executed.

It is our contention that, whilst many of the discussions on the barriers to change offered within the literature provide plausible explanations for individual challenges, it is only by looking holistically at the interconnected systems for the development of early education that a picture can emerge which identifies 'leverage points' for systemic change (Meadows and Wright 2009). Such a perspective is echoed by the work of Kemmis et al. (2014) who note that, in order for sustainable and systemic change to occur, it needs to be replicated across the range of practices within the education complex: in other words, all parts of the education system.

The development of practitioner competence

The challenges highlighted above around the inconsistency within teacher training are particularly significant for considering barriers to the development of policy-directed pedagogical enactments in relation to existing practice, as they can act as significant obstacles for sustainable change. For example, the disconnect between pedagogy and practice within teacher training programmes was noted during the research visits, with degree-level qualifications focusing on theoretical perspectives on learning without explicit relation to the pedagogical and practical implications of differing viewpoints. Although this may not be as significant in all areas of China, from the research visits it was also noted that expectations around practitioners rationalising, or questioning, their practice within Kindergartens varied enormously and in some contexts this was discouraged.

The literature reviews and analysis of the data from the practitioner discussions highlighted several factors which appeared to limit opportunities for practitioners to exercise pedagogical reasoning. Some of these outlined above include limited teacher training, some professional development opportunities which did not connect theory and practice or leadership approaches which appeared to emphasise compliance. While not intended as criticism, potentially highlighting these factors might help to explain the replication of historical practices. The apparent absence of an emphasis on pedagogical reasoning could account for practitioners being inculcated into performing in accordance with static, situated, notions of competence by limiting opportunities to challenge existing conceptions of competence with new perspectives. However, we were aware of the deficit view this perspective places on Chinese practice and therefore looked towards the communities of practice framework to provide a lens with which to attempt to conceptualise and articulate this process for both understanding the development of

new practitioners in context, and for considering individual activity in relation to broader, competing understandings of competence in practice.

In considering the situated nature of professional practice, Lave and Wenger (1991) offer the idea of 'legitimate peripheral participation' to consider the centripetal development towards 'mastery' located within communities of practice. Wenger (1998) emphasises the reciprocal relation between person and practice, highlighting that it is through participation in practices that individuals become increasingly familiar with the associated tools, actions, assumptions and understandings of the practice. From this view, individuals become increasingly aligned with the conceptions of competence contained within the valued practices of a community, through negotiation and renegotiation of meaning to gain greater mastery and facilitate continued competent participation.

Wenger's (1998) view is that through participation in a professional activity, practitioners simultaneously develop familiarity with the constituent skills upon which participation depends. This observation has two significant dimensions in relation to Chinese Kindergarten activity. The first dimension relates to the relationships between experience, training, pedagogy and practice. Practitioners have to interpret the participatory requirements in situ whilst at the same time being mindful of the conceptions from the perspective of different members of that particular community (such as parents, managers and other practitioners), as well as projecting mastery of those requirements; in other words understanding what is accepted as 'good' practice will influence how such practice is developed and nurtured. Such a situated learning environment can, potentially, perpetuate traditional ideas of teaching, learning and competent practice. The second dimension relates to the parameters for individual influence upon practice in relation to prevalent models of leadership within Chinese Kindergartens. Data from the research visits and literature reviews suggest models of leadership with expectations of high levels of authority and in some cases deference. Such a context, unless mindfully handled, could limit the agency of practitioners and constrain their interpretation, or adaptation, of practice.

Social systems and 'landscapes of practice'

The disconnect between pedagogical reasoning and practices in the development of conceptions of practitioner competence, within individual Kindergartens as single communities of practice, provides only a partial explanation for the replication of historically prevalent approaches to teaching and learning.

The initiation of practitioners into established conceptions of competence, and conceptions of learning, within institutions is interconnected with broader communities. As discussed, there is a range of public and private training and professional development institutions and opportunities currently available in China. However, our practitioner discussions indicated that many of these would appear to prioritise the transmission of 'technical knowledge' (Schön 1983, 63), which is disconnected from the contextually situated experience of the participants. The experiences shared with us suggest that this disconnect may contribute to the inculcation of practitioners into assimilating and imitating existing practices. This is not to suggest that these institutions, or any institutions, are singularly culpable for the challenges in changing pedagogical approaches, but merely to recognise that all organisations connected to ECEC in

China, in addition to relevant broader educational organisations, constitute the 'landscape of practice'.

The notion of a single community of practice misses the complexity of most 'bodies of knowledge.' Professional occupations, and even most non-professional endeavors, are constituted by a complex landscape of different communities of practice – involved not only in practicing the occupation, but also in research, teaching, management, regulation, associations, and many other relevant dimensions

(Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner 2014, 15)

Our discussions with practitioners suggested that the landscape of practice was a significant barrier to adopting certain forms of change. Specifically, professional development programmes tended to focus on transmission of knowledge: characterised as 'this is how you do it' rather than participative encounters that would encourage practitioners to develop original practice and sense-making themselves, or to seek adaptations that were congruent with the educational context. We were also told about complex parental expectations that articulated a desire for innovative and novel approaches whilst also being firmly entrenched in concerns about peer-advantage and being 'school ready'. Finally, we were introduced to Kindergarten evaluation and grading systems where traditional models of practice led to greater conceptions of competence, or the outward appearance of competence. Combined, these factors make up a context which is difficult to change or contest: accounts were given to us of an emphasis on quality as experienced through structural rather than process measures, and where participants were encouraged to reproduce esteemed over innovative practices.

It is our contention that the interconnections between pedagogy and practice are significant for considering the perspectives that are projected through educational activity. In the context of trying to support sustainable and culturally appropriate educational change in China, the interconnection between practice and pedagogy is particularly important as practitioners adjust to situated conceptions of competence or engage with professional development opportunities.

One element for considering the pedagogical beliefs that underpin practices is the conceptualisations of learners and learning. Practices enacted within educational institutions structure the experiences of the learners and, inevitably, convey pedagogical perspectives through conceptions of the knowledge, skills and understandings to be developed, the methods deemed to be appropriate for teaching and measuring the desired skills, and the approaches to the evaluation of the effectiveness of these methods for achieving their aims. These decisions both structure and reflect conceptions of learning and learners in a continual interplay between communities and individuals. As practitioners engage in institutionally prevalent practices, they are both accepting and reinforcing the institution's underlying view of 'learning'. Bruner (1996) highlights that it is through pedagogical practices that perceptions of learning and learners are communicated:

Any choice of pedagogical practice implies a conception of the learner and may, in time, be adopted by him or her as the appropriate way of thinking about the learning process. For a choice of pedagogy inevitably communicates a conception of the learning process and the learner. Pedagogy is never innocent. It is a medium that carries its own message.

(Bruner 1996, 63)

Educational practice, therefore, is both influenced by, and indicative of, implicit and explicit perspectives on learning and development. It is saturated with the values and theories which inform it, and through which interpretations of its suitability are evaluated. These values incorporate the beliefs, histories and priorities held by individuals and institutions, as well as the beliefs, histories and policies which inform the educational climate and determine the parameters of individual activity.

Folk pedagogy and folk pedagogy of change

Building from Wundt's (1916) notion of folk psychology, Olson and Bruner (1996) propose the concept of 'folk pedagogy'. Folk psychology suggests that historical and geographical cultures have prevalent lay theories about how minds work. These everyday beliefs are shaped by culturally entrenched assumptions about minds. Bruner (1996, 46) suggests that ideas about the nature of learning, held within institutions and wider society, can constitute pseudo-theories on learning and create a 'folk pedagogy'. These perspectives underpin educational practice, but also form the basis with which to perceive, and judge, the suitability of the practice. Varying views of learning place differing emphasis on individual endeavour and social interaction within the process. Each perspective on how children think and learn prioritises different practices which, in turn, reinforces the underlying assumptions and beliefs that construct them.

Different approaches to learning and different forms of instruction—from imitation, to instruction, to discovery, to collaboration—reflect differing beliefs and assumptions about the learner—from actor, to knower, to private experienter to collaborative thinker.

(Bruner 1996, 50)

From this view, the continuous interplay between assumptions about the nature of learning that underpin practice, and the reflection of these assumptions within classroom practice, further popularises specific practices and views on learning, subsequently disguising 'perspectives' and 'assumptions' as 'truths' by assimilating them into a cultural, or institutional, given. These 'truths' about learning become accepted and subsequently form the foundations upon which learners', and practitioners', competencies are perceived, and through which learners, and practitioners, perceive their own competencies. Importantly, in considering the development of practice, Olson and Bruner (1996) point out that it is, therefore, necessary when considering educational activity to understand the folk pedagogies that are shaping practice. They note that:

In theorizing about the practice of education in the classroom (or any other setting, for that matter), we must take into account the folk pedagogical theories that those engaged in teaching and learning already have, because any innovations will have to compete with, replace, or otherwise modify the folk theories that already guide both teachers and pupils.

(Olson and Bruner 1996, 11).

In the context of our research, the notion of Folk Pedagogy, originally introduced by Olson and Bruner (1996), has become a useful concept in understanding professional development. Llic Semiz and Bojovic (2016, 42) describe it as follows:

During their professional development, teachers are torn between two worlds of theories, assumptions and beliefs (Bruner 2000; Dow 2004). The first world consists of formal, explicated and verified theories, assumptions and beliefs on students, teaching and learning that future teachers are expected to adopt, accept and incorporate in their subsequent professional career. In contrast to the first, there is another world of theories, beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning, which manifests in the form of implicit, subconscious and hidden assumptions of preservice teachers and inservice teachers, known in literature as folk pedagogies.

In our exploration of the data from the research visits and the literature reviews, it struck us that the prevalent conception of learning within Chinese Kindergartens appeared to be focussed upon the knowledge and skills that children should acquire through rehearsal governed by adults. This has been explicitly stated by Li, Wang, and Wong (2011) but was also evident in our discussions with practitioners. We suggest that this prevalent view directs, and is reflected in, the teaching practices expected of practitioners, and popularised further by wider educational communities. We do not wish to suggest that such an approach is, in and of itself, somehow deficient. But our analysis highlights the disconnect between this dominant perspective and the child-centred pedagogy and learning that kindergartens are being encouraged to adopt through international collaborations and national policies.

It is in our contention that within China (and possibly other cultures as well), there exists a folk pedagogy which sits alongside a *folk pedagogy of change*. The folk pedagogy itself is influenced by a teacher's own experience of education, parental expectations of schools and schooling and implicit, intuitive, hidden beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning that are often shared within cultural settings. Additionally, we propose that there is a folk pedagogy of change that is dominant in educational settings. In some circles, this could be referred to as a theory of change: a way of articulating how sustainable change is likely to occur and what inputs and processes are necessary: an explicit way of describing how interventions are likely to result in change. To our mind, when engaged in projects, this theory of change concept needs to be expanded further to take into account not just how that change will happen, but the pedagogy that is necessary for it to occur. This idea of a folk pedagogy of change reflects a theory of change that we have found, through our encounters, to be particularly dominant in China.

The theory of change that we observed in China (outlined above) has a distinctively pedagogical component embedded within it. The implied pedagogy is one of observation, adaptation and implementation: where there is a hierarchical relationship between the 'advanced educational concepts' and the recontextualization and implementation of those concepts. This contrasts with a dialogic, constructivist notion of teacher learning dominant within much professional development literature and embedded within popular approaches to professional development in ECEC settings of which communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) would be a good example. We would argue that this approach is profoundly pedagogical, due to its emphasis on the teaching of change.

The idea of folk pedagogy of change is particularly powerful when aligned with cultural complexity. Educational interventions which do not adhere to the folk pedagogy of change are unlikely to go beyond superficial performances of change as they do not correlate with an understanding of how educational change occurs, the key drivers and the necessary conditions for success and acceptance.

Explicating theory of change through situated learning theory within a landscape of practice

Building from Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2014) notion of ‘learning in a landscape of practice’, our conceptualisation of a folk pedagogy of change is explicated through a lens of social learning within communities, which are connected to broader constellations of interdependent and interconnected organisations. Viewing Kindergartens as communities of practice within a landscape of practice provides a framework through which to consider how practitioners are inculcated into developing professional identities and practices which replicate existing conceptions of competence, and learning, and limit the effectiveness of the dominant theory of change. By considering the competing priorities of different elements of the landscape, and the implications of these for practice, one can view the points of tension and, potentially, identify resolution.

This lies at the heart of our idea of a folk pedagogy of change. Any development intervention is unlikely to succeed if due attention is not paid to the complexity of education concepts, the situatedness of learning and practice architecture and range of practices within educational settings (Kemmis et al. 2014). However, we suggest that recognising and ‘naming’ this phenomenon is a significant development in the field, for it enables us to ‘open up’ the conversation about how practitioners, leaders and policy-makers expect change to occur. Such a conversation can, we suggest, then reveal some of the tensions between practice and pedagogy, which as we have shown can act as barriers to sustainable change.

Whilst we acknowledge that China is a unique context, with a particular history that has resulted in a unique hybridity of these cultural perspectives, we reject the argument that these cultural differences alone are the root cause of why some educational initiatives have not been effective. We argue instead that such a position belies and underplays the considerable complexities of change, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. We certainly recognise that the waves of educational change have behaved as a form of neo-colonialism, and as such the influence from overseas has not been fully integrated into Chinese cultural perspectives. Indeed, we are sympathetic to the argument that the pressure to integrate certain ideas could be viewed as a form of oppression and dominance, in which engagement is likely to be superficial, piecemeal and performative. We also recognise that the processes of internationally influenced educational change are not unique to China and are increasingly widespread, as captured by the range of research on ‘policy borrowing’ within education. Burdett and O’Donnell (2016) note that understanding policy borrowing is further compounded by the complexity of education systems, their unbounded nature, and the inter-related way they respond, often paralleled with ecosystem structures. We concur with these observations and note that such complexity is overlooked when trying to account for the success of education policies or initiatives. It is on this basis that we propose that adopting a view of a folk pedagogy of change is useful and valuable conceptual frame through which educational change can be understood. Our understanding was developed in the context of ECEC in China, but has significantly wider applicability across a range of educational contexts and phases.

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